

Andrews University Seminary Studies, Vol. 55, No. 1, 83–105.
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THE RATIONALE FOR CANONICAL THEOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AFTER MODERNISM

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Abstract

What should systematic theology look like after modernism? Many recent answers to this question revolve around the communitarian turn, advocating the retrieval/*ressourcement* of Christian tradition in order to address the situation after the failure of modernity. While advancing a cogent criticism of modernism, however, communitarianism may jeopardize the functional priority of Scripture as canon. This article introduces and explains the rationale for canonical theological method as an alternative for the theological landscape after modernism.

Whereas communitarian approaches adopt a community-determined, normative, and extra-canonical interpretive arbiter of doctrine, canonical theology views the biblical canon as the uniquely authoritative and sufficient rule of doctrine. Toward providing the rationale for canonical theological method, this article briefly introduces the landscape of systematic theology after modernism, assesses some pertinent opportunities and challenges thereof, then introduces and briefly explains canonical theological method as a compelling way forward for systematic theology.

Keywords: theological method, canon, community, canonical theology, systematic theology, rule of faith, retrieval

Introduction

Systematic theology is defined and practiced in various, sometimes mutually exclusive, ways. Particularly since the rise of modernism led to a sharp separation of disciplines and an atomistic approach to biblical studies, the subject matter, sources, and methodology for doing systematic theology has been a matter of considerable dispute.¹ The modern separation of biblical studies and systematic theology, alongside widely accepted conclusions about the origin and nature

¹Throughout this essay, by modernism I have in mind (primarily) the quest for indubitable, neutral foundations and pure objectivity that engenders positivism. As Craig G. Bartholomew puts it: “Modernity is characterized by the privatization of religion and seeks to keep religion out of the public square, including education and scholarship, in which ‘neutral, objective reason’ is supposed to dominate” (*Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015], 466).

of the Bible as incapable of yielding a coherent system, contributed to the isolation of much of systematic theology from biblical studies (and vice versa).²

Modernism itself has crumbled, however, leaving somewhat open the question: What should systematic theology look like after modernism? Various answers are being proposed, many of which revolve around the postmodern communitarian turn, advocating (among other things) the retrieval and *ressourcement* of Christian tradition in order to address the fractures of postmodernism.³ While advancing a cogent criticism of modernism, however, communitarianism jeopardizes the *functional* priority of Scripture as canon.⁴

This article introduces and explains the rationale for an alternative, canonical, theological method in light of the theological landscape after modernism. Canonical theology diverges from communitarian approaches regarding the relative theological authority and functions of canon and community.⁵ Whereas communitarian approaches adopt a community-determined, normative, and extra-canonical interpretive arbiter of doctrine, canonical theology views the biblical canon as the uniquely authoritative and sufficient rule of doctrine, to the exclusion of a normative extra-canonical interpretive arbiter, while also recognizing a robust but non-normative role for the community.⁶ Toward providing the rationale for canonical theology, this paper introduces the landscape of systematic theology after modernism, assesses some pertinent opportunities and challenges thereof, then introduces and briefly explains canonical theological method as a compelling way forward for Evangelical systematic theology.

Systematic Theology After Modernism?

Christian systematic theology, minimally defined as the study and articulation of an orderly and coherent account of Christian beliefs, has a long and

²See, in this regard, Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³After the failure of modernism, then, there is an even greater diversity of views regarding how systematic theology should be practiced, if it should be practiced at all.

⁴In this essay, the “canon” refers to the sixty-six OT and NT books that are recognized most widely throughout Christianity (the common canonical core). I believe this canon has been correctly recognized (intrinsic canon) but not determined by the community (community canon). See Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 16–47. However, one need not subscribe to this view of the canon in order to implement the procedures of canonical theology.

⁵Various approaches in biblical studies and theology use the label “canonical” but depart in significant ways from one another and thus should not be conflated. Precisely what I mean by “canonical” theology will be explained further below.

⁶By communitarianism, then, I mean specifically any approach that adopts an extra-canonical normative arbiter. Criticism of communitarianism does not apply to the proper, robust role of the community, but refers to the ascription of a normative and determinative role for the community. On the proper and essential roles of the community (past and present), see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 60–61, 151–159.

rich history of deeply engaging and building upon Scripture.⁷ Since the Enlightenment, however, some scholars have viewed systematic theology (and other disciplines) through the bifurcating lens of modernism, relegating everything that came before as premodern and thus inferior.⁸ Claiming that the Bible was a primitive, unreliable, and self-contradictory collection of merely human opinions about the divine, modernistic liberal theology sought to build on the purportedly indubitable, universal, and neutral foundations of experience and reason.⁹

Modernism itself sprang from the quest for an indubitable and certain foundation for all knowledge, which Descartes thought he had found in the thinking subject (*res cogitans*). However, the strong or classical form of foundationalism of Descartes and others is now, according to Merold Westphal, “philosophically indefensible” and this is “so widely agreed that its demise is the closest thing to a philosophical consensus in decades.”¹⁰ Further, it is widely recognized that modernism’s attempt to remove “theological consensus” in order to “reveal a neutral territory” instead replaced “a certain view of God and creation with a different view which still makes theological claims” about “origins, purpose, and transcendence,” the “assumptions

⁷For an introductory overview, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁸Notably, however, there is no monolithic “premodern” view, but a host of views over the ages before the Enlightenment period.

⁹As James L. Kugel puts it, “modern scholarship” has reduced “Scripture to the level of any ordinary, human composition—in fact, arguing that it was in some cases even worse: sloppy, inconsistent, sometimes cynical, and more than occasionally deceitful” (*How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* [New York: Free Press, 2008], 667).

¹⁰Merold Westphal, “A Reader’s Guide to ‘Reformed Epistemology,’” *Per* 7.9 (1992): 11. Cf. idem, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*, *The Church and Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2009. Notably, however, the failure of *classical* foundationalism does not extend to just any kind of foundationalism. Rather, “modest foundationalism,” which does not posit “indubitability” or “certainty [as] a necessary condition of knowledge,” is (in various forms) a prevalent view advocated by “contemporary epistemologists” (though it is not without its critics) (J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004], 83–84). As Stanley J. Grenz himself notes amidst an ardent criticism of classical foundationalism, “nearly every thinker is in some sense a foundationalist,” that is, in the broad sense of recognizing and operating on “the seemingly obvious observation that not all beliefs (or assertions) are on the same level; some beliefs (or assertions) anchor others” and “certain beliefs (or assertions) receive their support from other beliefs (or assertions) that are more ‘basic’ or ‘foundational’” (“Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 110).

and prejudices” of which “are no more objective or justifiable than those of the ancient and mediaeval philosophers and theologians.”¹¹ Whereas modernism expects “neutral objectivity,” the recognition of the unavoidable hermeneutical circle wherein the reader never comes to any text as a blank slate but *both* reader and text contribute to any resulting interpretation has led most theologians to recognize the “impossibility of such neutrality,” leaving open many questions about foundational theological matters.¹²

While modernistic liberalism deconstructed “premodern” views of Scripture and Scripture’s claims about reality, precipitating the massive shift away from the long-held belief in the trustworthiness and unity of Scripture as canon, some conservatives of the age countered with a (perhaps unintentionally) modernistic conservatism that attempted to demonstrate the claims of Scripture on purportedly objective, neutral, and scientific grounds.¹³ In biblical studies, some in both liberal and conservative camps adopted a hermeneutical positivism that expected to be able to arrive at the pure objective meaning of the text, provided it was studied from a “neutral” standpoint via “objective” methods.

This quest for neutral objectivity and the attendant denial of the hermeneutical “I,” however, turned out to be counterproductive as it tended to allow unrecognized presuppositions of, and influences on, the interpreter(s) to determine the results of analysis and interpretation, which were then mistakenly declared objective and therefore universally valid. Further, in light of its defunct modernistic foundations, many scholars have been increasingly critical of “historical criticism of the Bible,” which has “seemed to involve criticism of everything except itself.”¹⁴ “Postmodernity,” instead, “extends modern suspicion to include such criticism of critical methods.”¹⁵ Accordingly, Daniel Treier and other advocates of the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) seek “to reverse the dominance of historical

¹¹Simon Oliver, “Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: From Participation to Late Modernity,” in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. Simon Oliver and John Milbank (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6.

¹²Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.

¹³See George A. Lindbeck’s highly influential framing and discussion of both modernistic approaches as the cognitive-propositionalist and experiential-expressive approaches, the former in reference to those tending to defend the “traditional orthodoxies” via a focus on “church doctrines” as “informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities,” and the latter of the “liberal commitment to the primacy of experience” and correlationist appropriation of the Enlightenment search for indubitable, universal, and neutral epistemological foundations (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984], 16, 113).

¹⁴Treier, *Introducing TIS*, 34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

criticism over churchly reading of the Bible,” opening many avenues for the future of systematic theology after modernism.¹⁶

Theological Opportunities and Challenges After Modernism

The demise of modernism presents numerous opportunities and challenges for systematic theology. First, it provides an opportunity to reject the modern rejection of the Bible as a trustworthy, coherent, and properly *theological* document. The theologian does not need to approach Scripture with the pretense of neutrality, but may come in faith, seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance toward better understanding.¹⁷ Indeed, given the widespread recognition that there is no neutral or universal epistemological starting point and every system begins with (defeasible) decisions regarding what to believe, one who adopts Scripture as theological rule (i.e., “canon”) has just as much epistemic right to that starting point as the one who adopts empiricism.¹⁸

The failure of modernism also presents an opportunity to move beyond the modernistic separation of disciplines and, in the process, challenge some of the presuppositions of modernistic approaches to exegetical and theological methodologies, particularly: (1) the tendency toward reading and interpreting Scripture atomistically with the presupposition of disunity and (2) the implicit (or explicit) hermeneutical positivism that expects certain methodologies to achieve a purely objective interpretation of the text as if it is being read from a neutral standpoint.¹⁹

Given the recognition that every reader’s subjectivity affects the reading of the text and the reading of the text affects the reader’s subjectivity (the hermeneutical circle), “hermeneutical positivism, with its exaltation of subjective annihilation,” supposition of a neutral standpoint, and “naïve

¹⁶Ibid., 14. Many other movements chart a similar path forward in this regard. See the discussion in Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 73–108.

¹⁷In this regard, my view is in agreement with that of the emphasis of TIS on moving beyond modernistic approaches that excluded reading the Bible as a distinctively theological text and its attendant aim “to reverse the dominance of historical criticism over churchly reading of the Bible” (Treier, *Introducing TIS*, 14). Cf. Francis Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 120.

¹⁸That is, every system requires the adoption of some starting point, which is not to say all are equally viable. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer notes: “Instead of making robust claims to absolute knowledge, even [well-informed] natural scientists now view their theories as interpretations” (*Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 19). As such, given the failure of modernism, why should we continue to accept its claims about the canon or its claims about the supposed need to start from a neutral foundation that then could justify adoption of the canon? Notably, even on communitarian grounds, a strong case can be made for accepting the canon as the widest consensual rule among Christians. See, in this regard, Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 193.

¹⁹See Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 73.

objectivism” is “entirely untenable.”²⁰ Theology is always done from some perspective that impinges upon the resulting interpretation.²¹ As such, Kevin Vanhoozer notes, “Hermeneutics involves more than a wooden application of methodological principles; hermeneutics requires good judgment.”²² Further, because everyone unavoidably brings some predisposition to their reading of the text, isolationism is detrimental to individuals attempting to practice it and to other Christians. Sustained engagement with historical theology and the contemporary community is essential to avoid narrow views, highlight blind spots, and, at times, be alerted to “some of the pitfalls we should avoid.”²³

Opposite the dangers of failing to move beyond hermeneutical positivism on one hand and isolationism on the other, however, is the converse danger of moving beyond both in a way that (unintentionally) subverts the rule of Scripture as canon by affording normativity to a community or community-determined rule. Moving beyond the modern liberalism vs. conservatism debate, numerous approaches seek to fill the void left by the failure of modernism via “the communitarian turn,” which has emerged as an increasingly popular way of doing theology among Protestants in recent decades.²⁴ Advanced as a way to ground doctrine in the absence of indubitable, universal, and neutral foundations and thus assuage fissiparous hermeneutical pluralism, communitarian approaches posit a normative, extra-canonical, interpretive arbiter.²⁵ This agenda of “retrieval” or “ressourcement,” which is

²⁰Thomas G. Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 194.

²¹As Bartholomew notes, the “history of the twentieth century and postmodernism have alerted us to the fact that neutral, objective reason is far from neutral but is itself invariably traditioned” (*Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 466).

²²Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 140. See the discussion of this relative to hermeneutical critical realism further below.

²³Grenz, “Christian Belief-Mosaic,” 126.

²⁴See *ibid.*, 121. Communitarian approaches, however, are by no means monolithic. Beyond the ancient Roman-Catholic and Orthodox communitarian approaches, a wide spectrum of Protestant communitarian approaches have put forth robust proposals for theologizing after modernism, some of the most prominent being postliberalism, posconservatism, TIS, consensual orthodoxy (aka paleo-orthodoxy), and radical orthodoxy. Whereas they each locate normative interpretive authority in some community or a community-determined arbiter, one crucial difference among communitarian approaches is between what John Franke calls “open confessional traditions,” which he advocates, and “closed confessional traditions,” the latter “hold[ing] a particular statement of beliefs to be adequate for all times and places” whereas the latter “understands its obligation to develop and adopt new confessions in accordance with shifting circumstances” (John R. Franke, “Scripture, Tradition, and Authority: Reconstructing the Evangelical Conception of *Sola Scriptura*,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004], 206–207).

²⁵For example, D. H. Williams contends that “where no interpretative guide exists as a theological ‘court of appeal,’ hermeneutical fragmentation can be the only

“a return to the ancient sources of the faith for their own sake,”²⁶ has become so prevalent in Evangelical circles that Peter Leithart notes: “Evangelicalism is awash in the 3Rs: retrieval, renewal, and ressourcement.”²⁷

Although communitarian approaches provide cogent criticisms of modernism and advance some healthy correctives, they also raise considerable issues/questions in practice.²⁸ Whereas many such approaches recognize the primacy of Scripture *formally*, the adoption of a normative interpretive arbiter undercuts the *functional* authority of Scripture as canon. As McGrath contends, we must be careful to avoid “plac[ing] the authority of an interpreter of Scripture over that of Scripture itself. The priority of Scripture over all other sources and norms, including its interpreters, must be vigorously maintained.” Otherwise, “it is not Scripture that is infallible but a specific interpretation [or interpreter or interpretative community] of Scripture.”²⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer adds, “We should resist locating interpretative authority in community consensus, for even believing communities, as we know from the Old Testament narratives, often get it badly wrong, and to locate authority in the community itself is to forgo the possibility of prophetic critique.”³⁰

result” (*Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 97–98). As such, an extra-canonical “rule of faith or norm for interpretation is essential if orthodox faith is to be achieved” (idem, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 77). Cf. Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 161.

²⁶Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 229. *Ressourcement* (aka *la nouvelle théologie*) was a renewal movement of Roman-Catholic thinkers who called for renewed reading of the Tradition (particularly patristic theology), which was influential upon the ecumenical trajectory of Vatican II. See Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds. *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). In recent decades, this language has appeared regularly in numerous Protestant works that call for retrieval of the great Christian tradition.

²⁷Peter J. Leithart, “The Word and the Rule of Faith,” *First Things*, 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/01/the-word-and-the-rule-of-faith>.

²⁸For further discussion of these, see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 103–108.

²⁹Alister E. McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 151. Franke suggests that “closed confessional traditions” risk “transforming their creeds . . . into de facto substitutes for Scripture” (Franke, “Scripture,” 206). However, open confessional traditions might do likewise insofar as the contemporary community is appealed to as normative.

³⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal About the Ministry and Ministry of Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 80. Williams, while strongly advocating communitarianism, recognizes that the “patristic tradition was not and is not infallible. None of the creeds that originated from that age is inerrant. Even the staunchest defender of the contemporary relevance of patristic resources will admit that not everything the patristic fathers taught is true or even valuable” (*Evangelicals and Tradition*, 78).

While community plays a crucial role, then, it is sometimes unclear just what that role is and how it *should* function theologically, particularly for those who wish to maintain the theological priority of Scripture as canon. Further, significant questions arise as to how to determine which community or community-determined arbiter should be normative and on whose interpretation.³¹ Whereas communitarian approaches aim at assuaging hermeneutical diversity in this way, whatever interpretive arbiter is adopted itself still requires interpretation. Hermeneutical diversity is not a problem of Scripture itself, but is the result of the universal hermeneutical situation that every communication requires interpretation (i.e., the unavoidable hermeneutical circle), which leads to some degree of inevitable hermeneutical diversity, even among competent interpreters. The quest to assuage hermeneutical diversity, whether via latent hermeneutical positivism or appeal to a normative hermeneutical arbiter, then, appears to be fueled by residual Cartesian anxiety over the failure of hermeneutical positivism and/or insufficient attention to the reality that all communication requires interpretation, which is unavoidably affected by the interpreter's conceptual framework. Indeed, there is a continued failure by many scholars to attend to the impact of individual and collective conceptual frameworks and their impact on interpretation at every level, particularly relative to overarching presuppositions that impinge upon how we view and interpret everything, which we will call macro-hermeneutical presuppositions.

Various overarching macro-hermeneutical presuppositions operate in past and present systematic theology, often without being consciously examined. Classical approaches tend to operate with a conceptual framework predicated on perfect being theology that is taken to be coincident with Scripture, some prominent forms of which posit a highly developed metaphysical framework that some believe is inconsistent with the framework that appears in Scripture (e.g., that of Neoplatonism).³² Alternatively, modernistic

³¹Even a living voice (*viva voce*) requires interpretation, as does all communication. See, further, Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 128–130.

³²Furthermore, Bartholomew contends that unhelpful “allegorization [which allows Scripture to be treated like a wax nose] stems from a neoplatonic theology and is an obstacle to hearing the true spiritual sense present in the plain meaning of the text” (Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 150). Numerous theologians from various perspectives have criticized the traditional “classical theism,” which holds that God is (among other things) simple, timeless, immutable, and impassible as being incompatible with Scripture and stemming from the extra-canonical framework of classical Greek philosophy. On the other hand, numerous theologians defend the classic tradition. Gerald L. Bray, for instance, contends that the Christian tradition was not corrupted by Greek philosophy while recognizing that “There is no doubt that the early Christians were influenced by the philosophical currents surrounding them” in order to address their contemporaries (“Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?” in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 112). The debate among theologians on this issue is ongoing. It should be noted, in

liberal theology rejects the “canonical” priority of Scripture and adopts a conceptual framework that, among other things, does not allow Scripture to be read as a theological document. Postmodern communitarian approaches instead ground the conceptual framework in the community or community adopted extra-canonical norms through which Scripture is read. Without assuming the falsehood of such conceptual frameworks *a priori*, however, the *methodological* adoption of any of these groundings of macro-hermeneutical presuppositions short-circuits the *functional* priority of Scripture as canon and *may* thereby undercut and replace the conceptual framework of Scripture and short-circuits the functional priority of Scripture as canon.

Canonical theology offers an alternative proposal regarding the derivation of macro-hermeneutical principles. It contends that the interpreter and interpretative community should continually seek to shape their conceptual framework via engagement with the canon itself in a continual hermeneutical *spiral*. This spiral consists of going back and forth between individual texts/pericopes and the wider canon toward mutually informing one another and, in turn, informing and reforming (where necessary) the interpreter’s own conceptual framework, with the goal of moving ever closer to the intended meaning *in* the text.³³

Canonical Theology as a Way Forward After Modernism

A Canonical Approach

In order to see how canonical theology may provide a viable and compelling way forward after modernism in this and other respects, we must first understand the basic approach, hermeneutical commitments, and methodology of canonical theology.³⁴ Canonical theological method is a particular step-by-step method for mining and utilizing the common canonical core (shared by the vast majority of Christians), which is approached as a unified corpus that is (collectively) the uniquely infallible, trustworthy, and sufficient source and rule of theological doctrine and interpretation. Here, the entire canon is employed as the formal *and* functional rule of theology against which all interpretations thereof should be continually brought, without neglecting engagement with the wider Christian community, past and present, and without overlooking that there are other sources of revelation and knowledge and that all interpreters are fallible and unavoidably bring their own conceptual framework to interpretation.

Canonical theology thus rests on treating the canon as “canonical” in: (1) the basic sense of the term “canon” as rule or standard of theology, the norm over which there is no norm (under God), hermeneutical or otherwise;

this regard, that “classical theism” is by no means monolithic; some who self-identify as classical theists do not hold some or all of the tenets listed above.

³³Cf. Grant Osborne’s view, wherein “continuous interaction between text and system forms a spiral upward to theological truth” (*The Hermeneutical Spiral* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 392).

³⁴For a more thorough presentation, see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 196–259.

(2) approaching and reading the canon as a unified (but not uniform) corpus; and (3) recognizing the canon as divinely commissioned (revealed and inspired) Scripture consisting of spiritual things that are spiritually discerned.³⁵ Put simply, employing Scripture as “canon” entails recognizing it as the divinely commissioned and thus unified corpus of writings that God has given as the rule or standard of theology, to be understood in subjection to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.³⁶

Canonical Goals: Correspondence and Coherence

Canonical theology aims at two criteria of adequacy: canonical correspondence and coherence. Canonical coherence seeks an internally consistent system, methodologically recognizing the canon’s claims to internal coherence via a sympathetic reading expecting congruence that nevertheless refuses to gloss over apparent tensions.³⁷ Canonical correspondence seeks the maximum achievable correspondence to the intention *in* the text that is discernible, demonstrable, and defensible.³⁸

³⁵That is, “canon” is the (1) divinely commissioned (2) rule, which is therefore a (3) unified corpus. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer puts it, there is a “properly theological unity implicit in the idea that God is the ultimate communicative agent speaking in Scripture,” the “divine author” of the canon (*The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 177, 181). Accordingly, “we must read the Bible canonically, as one book. Each part has meaning in light of the whole (and in light of its center, Jesus Christ)” (*ibid.*, 178). Nevertheless, those who do not share this conviction might approximate some procedures of this approach by way of something like a new literary criticism approach to the final-form canon as a unified corpus, perhaps alongside the view that the final form of the canon was redacted in a way that the community saw as a single unified corpus.

³⁶As David Yeago puts it, recognizing “the biblical canon as inspired Scripture” means to approach “the texts as the discourse of the Holy Spirit, the discourse therefore of one single speaker, despite the plurality of their human authors” such that “the church receives the canon, in all its diversity, as nonetheless a *single* body of discourse” (“The Bible: The Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures,” in *Knowing the Triune God*, ed. David Yeago and James Buckley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 70). In this regard, precisely because humans are skilled at self-deception (Jer 17:9), spiritual discernment in communion with God is needed toward the cultivation of a sanctified mind (cf. 1 Cor 2).

³⁷In this regard, Vanhoozer’s application of Paul Ricoeur’s distinctions between *idem* as a “self-sameness” or “hard identity,” where hard connotes immutability and permanence” and *ipse* identity, and “soft” identity” as a “kind of sameness” that “partakes more of narrative than of numeric identity” are quite helpful (*Drama of Doctrine*, 127). Vanhoozer proposes that, as divinely authored but not dictated, the canon exhibits a unity of *ipse* identity, which allows for “development” and “growth” and is thus “entirely, and especially, compatible with the ‘pattern of promise and fulfillment’ seen in OT and NT (e.g., the unity without uniformity manifest in the NT typological use of the OT)” (*ibid.*, 128).

³⁸The intention *in* the text is the effect of the author’s intention (cause) in writing that text. The text inscripturates (to some degree) authorial intention,

In this regard, canonical theology seeks to properly recognize the impact of the unavoidable hermeneutical circle by aiming at the discernible intention *in* the text while recognizing that human interpretations entail a degree of indeterminacy such that competent interpreters may disagree.³⁹ Nevertheless, while rejecting hermeneutical positivism, canonical theology also strongly rejects hermeneutical relativism, insisting instead that there is determinate meaning that the author(s) intended to convey in the text and thus adopts hermeneutical (critical) realism—the view that determinate meaning exists in the text independent of interpretation and yet the interpreter brings his/her conceptual framework to the text such that explicating the intention in the text is an imperfect, complex, and continual process.⁴⁰ The interpreter's task is to ascertain (as well as one can) the intent that is preserved and discernible *in* the text, in keeping with textual controls that delimit the justifiable scope of interpretation.⁴¹ While competent interpreters may differ because hermeneutical

but the text itself is never identical to the fullness of intention in the author's consciousness at the precise time of writing. As such, appeal to intent beyond or behind the text is speculative and appears to be counterproductive. Here, a text is, by definition, written by someone for some purpose (i.e., with some intention). The task of interpretation is to understand, as best as one can, that intention as it is conveyed *in* the text (without attempting to arrive at the intention in the author's consciousness, which is not an available object of investigation). As such, in the words of Christopher Seitz, canonical reading "shares a concern for the objective reality of the text and for its intentional direction and ruled character" ("Canonical Approach," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 100).

³⁹As Vanhoozer notes in rejecting hermeneutical positivism, "Texts may be determinate enough to convey meaning without being specifiable enough to overcome all ambiguity. . . . Literary knowledge, like its scientific counterpart, is both adequate (i.e., sufficient for the purpose of understanding and appropriating) and provisional (i.e., open to correction in the light of further enquiry)" (*Is There a Meaning*, 140).

⁴⁰See the discussion in *ibid.*, 26. Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 306–326. As such, canonical theology "seeks to navigate between the Scylla of wooden repetition [and hermeneutical positivism more broadly] and the Charybdis of interpretative anarchism [of hermeneutical pluralism]" (Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology*, 194).

⁴¹While canonical theology recognizes that one's interpretation is always more than the determinate intention in the text (cf. Gadamer's fusion or horizons), it insists that the interpreter's horizon should continually be subjected to the canonical text, as far as possible. In this regard, Scripture "has its *own* horizon, we have *our* horizon, and there have been many, many horizons in between" (Bruce Ellis Benson, "Now I Would Not Have You Ignorant: Derrida, Gadamer, Hirsch and Husserl on Authors' Intentions," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004], 186). Nevertheless, with Benson, "I believe that there are authors, that they have intentions, that words express intentions and that readers and listeners are able to discern those intentions" (*ibid.*, 191).

diversity is not methodologically eliminable, they might nevertheless “come together and check one another against the standard of the Scripture.”⁴²

This goal of canonical correspondence is especially important since systematic theologians sometimes neglect exegetical studies, isolating their theological construction from exegetical considerations, resulting in theology that is not subjected to the rule of the canon. Conversely, *some* exegetes tend to neglect a systematic outlook, which may leave them unintentionally beholden to systematic presuppositions that unduly impact their interpretation (e.g., an alien conceptual framework). Canonical theology seeks to integrate exegesis and systematic theology under the rule of the canon.

Canonical Hermeneutics and Methodological Steps

Canonical hermeneutics brings micro- and macro-exegesis together systematically in a reciprocally correcting manner. Micro-exegesis refers to the procedures of grammatical-historical exegesis at the level of pericopes and macro-exegesis refers to interpretation that goes beyond a particular pericope toward seeking the canonical conceptual framework.⁴³ By these complementary levels of exegesis, canonical hermeneutics deliberately attends to the two operative hermeneutical circles of (1) the relation between the reader’s conceptual framework and the conceptual framework affirmed in the text and (2) the relation of the parts of the canon to the whole and vice versa. Micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it is important to recognize that, because far more than methodological procedures are at work in doing theology, canonical hermeneutics entails commitments to: a humble interpretive posture and orientation toward the text and theology, the practice of ethical and charitable reading, and recognition of the limits of human language and interpretation.⁴⁴

With regard to the limits of human language, canonical theology seeks the maximal possible understanding of divine revelation, believing the canon’s claims that humans can understand *in part* while recognizing that our understanding is always incomplete and susceptible to misunderstanding

⁴²D. A. Carson, “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. by J. D. Woodbridge and T. E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 53–54.

⁴³At both levels, the interpreter attempts to interpret the text in accordance with internal textual indicators. As such, biblical texts are interpreted according to their textually-indicated genre and thus are not treated as allegorical or mythological absent some textual indication. For a brief overview of the procedures of grammatical-historical interpretation and how they derive from and are congruent with the internal contents of the canon, see Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture: An Hermeneutical ‘Decalogue,’” *JATS* 4.2 (1993): 95–114. While embracing grammatical-historical procedures, however, canonical theology departs from the separation of disciplines and atomistic approach to the text assumed in some iterations of the grammatical-historical method.

⁴⁴See the discussion of each of these in Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 218–225.

(cf. 1 Cor 13:12).⁴⁵ Accordingly, ethical and charitable reading intends to understand what someone has written for some purpose by choosing to listen and try to understand, employing hermeneutically the golden rule: read as you would want your words to be read.⁴⁶ In this regard, recognition of Scripture as canon (i.e., rule) evokes a posture of humility, submission, and willingness to have one's theology ruled by the canon (cf. Ps 119:161). Accordingly, canonical theology aims at humble theological construction restricted to what is discernible, demonstrable, and defensible on the basis of the canonical data, avoiding both overreaching dogmatism and reductionism, attempting to allow questions and tensions to remain whenever investigation of the biblical data is underdeterminative.

With these commitments and aims in mind, the canonical theologian takes the following steps: (1) identify the issues/questions by extensive literature review (subject to change based on canonical investigation); (2) attempt to table known presuppositions that impinge upon the theological issues/questions (targeted epoché) and conduct an inductive reading of the canon and extract for further study any texts/passages that even touch on the questions; (3) pour over the data derived from the inductive reading, analyzing and organizing it according to discernible canonical patterns; (4) based on the analysis of the data, construct a minimal model that addresses the theological issues/questions; and, finally, (5) systematize the model by situating the tentative theological conclusions within the context of the wider theological landscape, with openness to further investigation and correction.⁴⁷ In this way, canonical theology employs the canon as the divinely commissioned source and rule from which (tentative) answers are derived to theological questions, toward the articulation of a coherent systematic model that corresponds to the text as nearly as achievable (but never seeks to replace it), while continually subjecting the theologian's conceptual framework (and other conclusions) to that of the canon in a hermeneutical spiral.⁴⁸

⁴⁵As Paul puts it, "now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

⁴⁶See Daniel R. Schwarz's five stages of ethical reading of literature: (1) "Immersion in the process of reading and the discovery of imagined worlds," and (2) "Quest for understanding," including seeking "to discover the principles and worldview by which the author expects us to understand characters' behavior," (3) "Self-conscious reflection," (4) "Critical analysis," and (5) "Cognition in terms of what we know," moving "back and forth from the whole to the part" ("The Ethics of Reading Elie Wiesel's *Night*," in *Elie Wiesel's Night*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), 72–74.

⁴⁷For an example of theology derived via this method, see Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

⁴⁸The extracted model is never the final word but always remains secondary to the canonical text, which further corrects the system via ongoing canonical investigation.

*Beyond Modernistic Exegesis: Micro-Exegesis and
Macro-Exegesis as a Way Forward*

With the broad scope of canonical theology in mind, we turn now to focus on how canonical theology employs micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis toward advancing: (1) beyond hermeneutical positivism without falling into hermeneutical relativism, and (2) beyond the modern atomistic approach to the Bible and the attendant separation of biblical studies and systematics. Toward these goals, canonical theology deliberately attends to both the hermeneutical circles of: (1) reader and text and (2) the parts and the whole of the canon, via a hermeneutical spiral of micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis that continually subjects the interpreter's conceptual framework and interpretations to criticism and correction by the text.⁴⁹

Micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis are reciprocally operative levels of exegesis, the former consisting of exegesis at the level of pericopes and the latter seeking the conceptual framework set forth in the canon, within which the text can be read coherently.⁵⁰ Micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis function against the background of the three levels of macro-, meso-, and micro-hermeneutical presuppositions. Micro-hermeneutical presuppositions operate at the level of individual texts/pericopes, macro-hermeneutical presuppositions refer to one's overarching conceptual framework, and meso-hermeneutical principles refer to doctrinal commitments in-between. In biblical interpretation, each of these levels is operative and impinges upon the others. One's conceptual framework (macro) sets the ontological and epistemological parameters within which doctrines (meso) are conceptualized, both of which impinge upon the reading of individual texts/pericopes (micro). Conversely, reading of individual texts/pericopes *should* affect one's meso- and macro-hermeneutical presuppositions.

Every interpreter reads from some perspective and thus is affected, for good or ill, by macro-hermeneutical presuppositions (among others). Macro-hermeneutical presuppositions about the nature of God and reality (ontology) drastically affect the way the text can be read. For example, those who view God as impassible (that is, unable to be affected by anything external) tend to read the highly emotional descriptions of God throughout the canon (e.g. Hos 11:8–9) as anthropopathic, that is, metaphorical descriptions of emotion that do not actually correspond to God. Conversely, a strong case can be made that the exegetical force of the numerous emotional depictions of God in the canon should be allowed to question whether God is impassible in the first place.⁵¹ As Brevard Childs notes, "For systematic theologians the

⁴⁹This approach expands upon Fernando Canale's crucial distinction between [micro]hermeneutical and [macro]phenomenological exegesis (*Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001], 148–149).

⁵⁰Put simply, macro-exegesis attempts to derive macro-hermeneutical presuppositions from the text itself.

⁵¹See Peckham, "Theopathic or Anthropopathic? A Suggested Approach to

overarching categories are frequently philosophical. The same is often the case for biblical scholars even when cloaked under the guise of a theory of history.”⁵² Accordingly, as Craig Bartholomew notes well, “One ignores the role of philosophy in biblical interpretation at one’s peril.”⁵³

In this regard, the deliverances of micro-exegesis are always influenced by macro- and meso-hermeneutical presuppositions. Consider the beginning of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). An attempt to interpret this sentence raises questions such as: Who is God? What are the heavens and the earth? What does it mean to create? What is the beginning?⁵⁴ These questions impinge upon macro- and meso-hermeneutical presuppositions and some supply the answers from their pre-existing worldview, that is, without deliberately addressing such questions. If I come to Genesis 1 with a rigid conception of who God is already or a particular doctrine regarding the origin of the earth, however, I will tend to read the text through such lenses and may thereby severely distort the meaning in the text by imposing my own conceptual framework on it. Alternatively, modernism asserted that the text should be read from the purportedly neutral standpoint of non-theism. However, after modernism it is widely recognized that there is no neutral standpoint. As Anthony Thiselton puts it, “Non-theism or positivism is no more value-free than *theism*.”⁵⁵

Given this situation, canonical theology employs micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis to address the interpreter’s presuppositional framework and help to bridge the Enlightenment-generated gap between biblical studies and systematic theology.⁵⁶ This is premised on the view that the canon, as divinely commissioned rule, conveys an overarching conceptual framework.⁵⁷ Therefore, the canonical text should be read toward informing

Imagery of Divine Emotion in the Hebrew Bible,” *PRSt* 42.4 (2015): 87–101.

⁵²Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 158.

⁵³Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 131. Rob Lister adds, “metaphysical reflection on scriptural revelation is not, in principle, unacceptable” but is actually “unavoidable. Indeed, Scripture does commend a metaphysic (e.g., the Creator/creature distinction)” (*God is Impassible and Impassioned* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 174).

⁵⁴Not to mention the micro-exegetical questions of whether the phrase be rendered “In the beginning, God created” or “In the beginning of God’s creation,” the answer to which holds macro-hermeneutical implications.

⁵⁵Anthony C. Thiselton, “Canon, Community, and Theological Construction,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 4.

⁵⁶This avoids the separation of biblical studies and theology by treating “doctrine” as “largely a matter of exegesis, of providing ‘analyses of the logic of the scriptural discourse’” (Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 20).

⁵⁷I adopt the view that this is due to the divine authorship of the canon, but one might also operate similarly with either a conception of canon consciousness such that the conceptual framework was transmitted down through the generations to selected

and (where necessary) transforming one's conceptual framework via an ongoing hermeneutical spiral, examining the particulars of the canonical text first, from which broader conclusions may be derived rather than presupposing putatively universal macro-hermeneutical presuppositions that methodologically determine the particulars.⁵⁸

As noted earlier, this hermeneutical spiral addresses both the crucial hermeneutical circle of reader and text and the hermeneutical circle of the parts and the whole of the canon via the reciprocal operation of micro- and macro-exegesis. These ask fundamentally different, yet complementary, questions of the text, micro-exegesis seeking the intention discernible in the text in its immediate context and macro-exegesis utilizing micro-exegetically derived data to uncover the conceptual framework conveyed in the text that undergirds and circumscribes its meaning. The text at the micro-level holds methodological priority such that the interpreter seeks to recognize, temporarily suspend, and examine pertinent and identifiable operative macro- and meso-hermeneutical presuppositions (targeted epoché) toward allowing the text to inform all three levels and provide its own conceptual framework via a continuous hermeneutical spiral.⁵⁹

Accordingly, canonical theology resists the methodological vestiges of the modernistic ideal of neutrality that remain in some exegetical approaches, which purport to interpret the text "objectively," independent of (and thus perhaps blind to) an operative conceptual framework. Since the interpreter *always* brings a conceptual framework that impinges upon interpretation, it is crucial that exegesis not be undertaken without consciously engaging the operative conceptual framework (of both reader and text). When the operative conceptual framework is not intentionally addressed, there is a significant danger that an alien framework will be unwittingly read into, and superimposed upon, the text.⁶⁰ Micro-exegesis without attention to macro-hermeneutical presuppositions is prone to macro-*eisegesis*.

canonical writers and compilers via catechesis or a canon criticism perspective of the final-form canon as a unified literary document received and/or redacted by the community.

⁵⁸As Thiselton puts it, "Texts can actively shape and transform the perceptions, understandings, and actions of readers" (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 31).

⁵⁹By "suspend," I mean to put on the table for investigation and evaluation. Here, then, I have in mind a *minimal* targeted epoché, which is the careful and intentional "tabling" of those recognizable and relevant presuppositions that impinge upon the matter at hand. This minimal targeted epoché, then, does not attempt to "table" *all* of one's presuppositions. Were this even possible, the success of such radical epoché would remove the ability to conduct the investigation itself. Rather, in this approach a minimal epoché is targeted to suspend (i.e., "table") presuppositions in those areas that might be reasonably expected to impinge upon the study in the attempt to let the text speak for itself rather than being forced into an alien mold, while recognizing that presuppositionless interpretation is unattainable.

⁶⁰See the discussion of the impact of neoplatonism on the exegesis and doctrines of some church fathers in Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 135,

Conversely, micro-exegesis and macro-exegesis should function concurrently in an ongoing, reciprocally correcting manner, attempting to avoid reducing or flattening the multivalency of the text(s) while seeking the wider canonical context that preserves the individual nuances of the text(s).⁶¹ Rejecting dichotomies between individual texts/pericopes and the canon as a whole, canonical theology embraces both in mutual reciprocity such that “system” is not sought at the expense of the complexity and variety of individual texts. In this way, canonical theology looks beyond (without overlooking) the limits of individual texts/pericopes, viewing Scripture’s parts in light of the whole and the whole in light of its parts without artificially imposing one upon the other. It thus transcends atomistic exegetical methodologies and/or biblical theologies that are restricted to a mere compilation and/or summary of purportedly fragmentary parts. As such, canonical theology seeks to avoid an atomistic reading of Scripture, which has been the unfortunate byproduct of some modernistic approaches to exegesis, in favor of reading the canon theologically in accordance with its own subject matter. Whereas it is worthwhile to attempt to avoid reading theological presuppositions into the text, it is counterproductive to attempt an *atheological* reading of a theological text.⁶² Given the failure of modernism, I take it to be within my epistemic rights to abandon the ideological and methodological strictures of modern biblical criticism and critically question the procedures and results of interpretations that presuppose anti-supernatural bias, a fragmentary view of the text, or otherwise undercut the ruling authority of Scripture as canon.⁶³

Accordingly, canonical theology avoids basing theological conclusions on speculative reconstructions of tradition history and therefore does not focus on a reconstructed pre-canonical history “behind” the text.⁶⁴ Yet, as Vanhoozer

141–154, 448–449.

⁶¹The attempt, here, is to recognize and do justice to the complexity of the exegetical upshot of the text (via grammatical-historical procedures), bringing the exegesis of the parts of the canon to bear on the whole and vice versa without injury to any of it. This recognizes that a method of analogy “can lead to an overemphasis on the unity of biblical texts,” resulting in “‘artificial conformity’ that ignores the diversity of expression and emphasis between divergent statements in the Bible” (D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 361).

⁶²“Atheological” exegesis methodologically contradicts its subject matter and thus contradicts an ethical and charitable reading of what is intended *in* the text, written by someone(s) for some purpose.

⁶³As Treier notes well: “We need not ignore the historical development of words and concepts, engaging in simplistic synthetic connections that obscure the particularities of any given text. But neither should we operate as prisoners of alien standards imposed by academic guilds that tend to reject the unity of Scripture or allow passages to relate only on the narrowest criteria” (*Introducing TIS*, 201).

⁶⁴This does not intend to criticize historical disciplines as properly practiced, but to recognize the fluidity and speculative nature of the deliverances of many results of modern historical criticism of the Bible, which frequently focuses on secondary subject matter behind the text to the detriment of focus on the primary subject matter of the

puts it, such a “canonical approach” has “nothing to do with an ahistorical approach that takes the Bible as a free-floating ‘text,’ nor with a historicist approach that focuses on the events behind the text” but “takes the whole canon as the interpretative framework for understanding God, the world, oneself, and others” by reading “individual passages and books as elements within the divine drama of redemption.”⁶⁵ Similarly, canonical theology’s emphasis on the final-form canon does not neglect the canon’s diachronic elements; canonical theology does not simply read Scripture synchronically but via grammatical-historical procedures that take seriously the history (and unfolding revelation) brought forth in and by the text itself.⁶⁶

Taking the canon to accurately represent its own history, canonical theology focuses on the text’s claims and engages relevant *extant* historical materials that may assist interpretation (e.g., other ancient literature, artifacts) while reserving priority for the canonical text and being wary of the tendency to take an ancient extra-canonical parallel and read it into biblical text.⁶⁷ Whereas extant extra-biblical texts and artifacts illuminate the background and interpretive options of the text, they are not determinative because (among other reasons): (1) the relationship between the text/artifact and the canonical text, if any, is often unknown; the biblical authors may not have been aware of the text/artifact in question and, even if they were, may have intentionally departed from the views represented therein; (2) historical correspondence depends upon the often disputed dating/authorship of the biblical texts, leaving questions whether reuse of a text is present and, if so, which text is reusing the other; and (3) extra-biblical texts/artifacts must

text itself. Cf. Joel Green’s view that “theological interpretation of Christian Scripture concerns itself with interpretation of the biblical texts in their final form, not as they might be reconstructed by means of historical-critical sensibilities (i.e., Historical Criticism)” (*Practicing Theological Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 49).

⁶⁵Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 149.

⁶⁶Cf. Walter C. Kaiser Jr.’s concept of epigenetic growth (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2001], 8). Consider, in this regard, Richard M. Davidson’s explanation of his approach as analyzing “the theology of the final canonical form of OT. It utilizes insights from such widely accepted synchronic methodologies as the new literary criticism and the new biblical theology, which focus upon the final form of the OT text. It will not inquire about the possible precanonical history of the text but seek to understand the overriding theological thrust of Scripture wholistically as it now presents itself in the biblical canon. This canonical, close-reading approach does not ignore, however, the unique settings and theological emphases of different sections of the canonical OT. By focusing upon the final form of the OT text, I believe it is possible that the interests of both liberal-critical and evangelical OT scholarship may merge in seeking to understand what constitutes the canonical theological message of the OT regarding human sexuality” (*Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 2–3).

⁶⁷An interpreter who questions, however, whether the canon accurately depicts history might suspend judgment in this regard and/or take a realistic narrative approach (cf. Hans Frei) and ask what kind of claims (historical and otherwise) the text itself affirms and to what theological conceptions such claims lead.

themselves must be interpreted and we may know considerably less about the extra-canonical text/artifact and its context than we know about the biblical text that it is used to interpret.⁶⁸ Canonical theology thus urges caution when using extra-canonical historical data to interpret the biblical text, aiming to avoid parallelomania and the imposition of an alien framework that may have been held by contemporaries of the biblical authors but not representative of the views they intend to express in the text and thus at odds with the conceptual framework revealed by God within the canon.

Accordingly, canonical theology avoids a bifurcation between what the text *meant* and what it *means*, seeking the meaning that is preserved *in* the text as received and situated within the wider narrative context that itself is crucial to the canonical conceptual framework.⁶⁹ As such, while canonical theology employs the grammatical-historical *procedures* of exegesis *canonically*, it provides much more than merely a glorified exegetical outline or summary contextualized for a contemporary audience. Challenging any rigid separation between exegetical and theological disciplines, the systematic theologian plays a vital role in asking questions of the text while deliberately requiring text-based and text-controlled answers, continually seeking the inner logic of the canon without expecting that each question will receive a determinate answer.⁷⁰

However, it is essential to continually distinguish between the methodological goal of a purely canonical reading and the phenomenological reality that we never arrive at a fully canonical reading. While Scripture is infallible, our individual and collective interpretation of it is not. Although the canonical theologian aims at a conceptual framework and resultant

⁶⁸For example, see the discussion of how ANE parallels regarding so-called “covenant love” have sometimes been imposed on biblical interpretation in ways that may run contrary to the evidence of the biblical text itself in Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love in the Context of the God-World Relationship* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 197–201.

⁶⁹Whereas the historical author’s intention is not entirely recoverable, as cause of the text it grounds the contemporary meaning *in* the text. Cf. the cogent criticism of the distinction between what the text meant and means in Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” *TJ* 5.2 (1984): 113–127. Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 32. There is also a concern here about putting too much emphasis on how an interpreter thinks the original audience would have understood a text (an original audience communitarianism that has some parallels in this regard to postmodern emphasis on reader-response), which is unavoidably speculative and may not correspond to the author’s original purpose(s).

⁷⁰As such, canonical theology does not outsource exegesis of the canonical data but requires careful attention to the primary source material of the canon itself in order to effectively discern what might be usefully and appropriately gleaned from secondary sources. Thus, the systematician who is untrained in exegesis might consider pairing up with an exegetically proficient partner. In this and other ways, canonical theology seeks to transcend the modern separation of disciplines toward greater, transdisciplinary collaboration in order to employ high-level exegesis of the text, knowledge of historical theology and the history and impact of philosophy, and a sound understanding of principles and methods of systematic theology.

theology shaped, reformed, and brought into union with the canonical conceptual framework via a continuous hermeneutical spiral, the interpreter's presuppositions always impinge upon interpretation and the derived conceptual framework such that theological conclusions should remain continuously open to further investigation and revision toward better and better understanding.⁷¹ As such, canonical theology does not attempt to construct an immovable cathedral-like systematic theology but, via an ongoing hermeneutical spiral, aims at constructing dynamic and ambulatory models (analogous to Israel's traveling wilderness tabernacle), ever-moving and ever-reforming in (attempted) correspondence to the canonical text as God's rule.⁷² This entails recognition of the limits of canonical theology, to which we now briefly turn.

Some Limits of Canonical Theology

The goals and methodology discussed above provide a methodologically limited scope of *canonical* theology, which does not exclude further theological work that takes the results of canonical theological method and employs those results in dialogue with a broader scope of data.⁷³ Employment of canonical theological method on various matters might provide abundant material for productive engagement with dialogue partners across a broad range of disciplines. The proposal here is not to delimit theological (or other) scholarship as a whole by canonical methodology, but that such a delimited theological method might provide for those who choose to practice it a (methodological) starting point from which other areas and issues might be more fruitfully engaged systematically.⁷⁴ Canonical theology, then, does not make any claim to exhaustive theology, since the study of God is inexhaustible and there is much more that God could reveal that is not within the canon (cf. John 21:25).

⁷¹As Jean Grondin states, "The goal of understanding better, conceived in terms of an unreachable *telos* and the impossibility of complete understanding, bears witness to the fact that the endeavor to interpret more deeply is always worthwhile" (*Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], 71).

⁷²The objective of canonical theological method, then, is to come as close as possible to a canonically-derived system, though recognizing that one never achieves this perfectly. The conclusions of canonical theological method are thus "true" insofar as they correspond to the canon, which this approach takes to be the standard of theological truth. Accordingly, canonical theology does not attempt to atomistically extract isolated doctrines from the rich narrativity of Scripture, but sees itself as inextricably situated within the dynamic narrative of the God-world relationship, of which the canon is a covenant witness document. See Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 209–212.

⁷³Of course, it also does not exclude the ongoing work being done within the various disciplines themselves.

⁷⁴That is, those committed to canonical theology can methodologically direct attention and resources to canonical theology without in any way detracting from the ongoing efforts of others who contemporaneously seek to contextualize current understanding across disciplines. Other disciplines would continue with their work concurrently but perhaps with more openness to transdisciplinary collaboration.

As such, the canonical theologian does not expect the canon to provide answers to all of our questions and does not propose it as the only object of study. Yet, I believe that far more theological mining of the canon would go a long way toward charting the path forward for how theology relates to contemporary questions, allowing the canon to rule not merely formally but functionally. Accordingly, when it comes to engagement with the main branches of philosophy (e.g., metaphysics and epistemology), for example, because canonical theology aims at a dynamic and ambulatory wilderness-sanctuary-like construction of theological models rather than a cathedral-like fully-developed system, it does not expect to yield conclusive positions regarding many of the intricate questions of metaphysics and epistemology. As such, canonical theology rejects the modernistic supposition that “foundational” philosophical questions must be conclusively answered a priori or via generalized abstraction from limited data. Instead, canonical theology focuses on careful examination of particulars in their canonical context without delimiting the options regarding what might be the case generally, attempting to avoid imposing a universal or totalizing conceptual framework.

Relative to ecclesiology, far more careful consideration needs to be given to the essential, positive role of the community toward avoiding isolationism on the one hand and communitarianism on the other. Here, distinctions should be recognized between (1) canonical theology, (2) ecclesial doctrines, and (3) ecclesial policy and practice. In my view, ecclesial policy and practice has a wider range of acceptable derivation than theological doctrine, in consideration of the fact that the canon is selective in what it addresses. Whereas one should not prematurely assume that Scripture does not set forth either a principle or policy that applies to a specific matter of ecclesial policy or practice, where one or both is absent, the church has a degree of authority within the sphere of intra-church policy and governance (1 Thess 5:12; Tit 1:5–9) and a duty to appropriately contextualize the practice and communication of the faith (without compromising biblically derived theological doctrine). With regard to the distinction between canonical theology and ecclesial doctrine (e.g., fundamental beliefs, confessions, or creeds), a given church’s doctrinal statements may possess ministerial authority within that particular community, but are themselves subject to disconfirmation by Scripture. As such, canonical theology would be distinct from ecclesial doctrine; the former should inform the latter without the latter being allowed to function methodologically as a normative hermeneutical arbiter. While we all operate from within some community, the positive role of which should never be overlooked, that community need not and should not be methodologically determinative. Instead, the divinely commissioned canon should be allowed to rule in matters of theological doctrine and interpretation.

Conclusion: Revisiting Opportunities and Challenges

This essay has introduced the landscape of systematic theology after modernism, assessed some pertinent opportunities and challenges thereof, and introduced and briefly explained canonical theological method, which recognizes and employs

the canon as a unified corpus that is divinely commissioned to rule theological doctrine and interpretation. It now remains to revisit how canonical theology meets some of the opportunities and challenges of the current landscape, toward providing a way forward for systematic theology after modernism.

Canonical theology aims at helpfully meeting some of the most pertinent challenges facing systematic theology after modernism and also takes up numerous opportunities. Among other things, canonical theology moves beyond modernistic classical foundationalism (and its quest for indubitability, neutrality, and objectivity) and hermeneutical positivism: (1) recognizing the level epistemological playing field after modernism such that the biblical canon is at least as legitimate a starting point for theological thinking as other options and thus does not require justification *a priori*; and (2) abandoning the pretense of neutral reading in favor of a properly theological reading of Scripture as canon that seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without presupposing the indefeasibility of the interpreter's conceptual framework (including macro-hermeneutical presuppositions).

Whereas modernism led to a rejection and replacement of the so-called "premodern" commitment to Scripture as a divinely commissioned and unified *theological* corpus, canonical theology retrieves the canon as "canonical," that is as: (1) divinely commissioned rule; (2) unified corpus; and (3) superintended by the Holy Spirit. In so doing, canonical theology is critical and alert to the vestiges of modernism that remain in critical methodologies that purport to mandate an atheological reading of a distinctively theological text and the related separation of disciplines, including (but not limited to) atomistic approaches to biblical studies and theology. Over and against an atomistic approach to exegesis (critical or otherwise), canonical theology believes that close, controlled reading of the text in context (micro-exegesis) is not mutually exclusive to broad, canonical reading of the text (macro-exegesis), but both might be mutually beneficial and also help draw attention to, and potentially reform, the interpreter's ever-present macro-hermeneutical presuppositions that sometimes go undetected and therefore operate as uncritical assumptions in both exegesis and theology.

Even given the best methodology, however, canonical theology recognizes that hermeneutical diversity will remain. Whereas some seek to assuage hermeneutical diversity by turning to the community to provide a normative interpretive arbiter, canonical theology does not expect to eliminate hermeneutical diversity and wishes to avoid any subversion (however unintentional) of the *functional* canonical authority of Scripture. If theological knowledge is limited to that which God reveals, as canonical theology holds, and even this we "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12, KJV), then there can be no hermeneutical stopping point. Rather, "'final' or absolute biblical interpretations are properly eschatological."⁷⁵

⁷⁵Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 80. "For the moment, we must cast our doctrines not in the language of heaven" but in the "culture-bound languages of earth, governed, of course, by the dialogue we find in Scripture itself" (ibid.).

Canonical theology thus advocates a methodological return to the canon toward the retrieval of the conceptual framework posited therein without naively thinking we can do so with absolute purity (hermeneutical positivism) and thus always searching to better attend to the text while doing so in community without communitarianism, which will reveal blind spots and allow us to advance together without expecting that we will thus agree on everything.⁷⁶ As such, canonical theology not only approaches Scripture as the uniquely authoritative and sufficient source of theological doctrine, but also employs the canon as rule, thus denying any normative extra-canonical interpretive arbiter and, instead, directing the interpreter back to the canon as rule in a continuous hermeneutical spiral.

⁷⁶As such, canonical theology aims to avoid both the poles of isolationism and communitarianism and the poles of hermeneutical positivism and hermeneutical relativism.